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Edizioni Tracce

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EDIZIONI TRACCE

Washington, DC / Europe: Henry Adams's Version of
the International Theme*

Henry Adams's early experience of Europe is available to us in the form of a "twice-told tale". The first version, more direct and for all its youthful sophistication, occasionally naïve, is to be found in the letters he wrote home at the time (1858-68): however, since Adams had declared from the first his intention to emulate Horace Walpole by leaving in his correspondence a complete picture of his times to posterity, he was already aiming at a wider audience. Often in the form of a travelogue, some letters were published on arrival: all show the writer's awareness of his public, a remarkable degree of self-conscious elaboration and some artful touching up, but on the whole they reflect the young traveller's reactions and ideas with tolerable accuracy and sincerity, though Adams (according to his brother Brooks) was never quite frank with himself or with others.

The second version, carefully edited and refashioned half a century later in order to serve a deliberate overall design, can be read in the *Education*: its shape and meaning are firmly controlled by the pervasive symbolic pattern the older Adams imposed in retrospect on the experiences of his life. This must be kept in mind if we intend to examine Adams's treatment of the international theme diachronically, charting its presence and gauging its significance throughout his career. When assessing the impact of his first contact with Europe at twenty and his later, long stay in England, it would be misleading to consider chapters V-XV of the *Education* as a fully reliable account of the young man's sensations and opinions, since this would mean identifying Henry Adams with "Henry Adams" the "manikin",

as if they were interchangeable¹.

As his father often reminded him, Adams was the first in the family to be indulged in the Grand Tour: when he left for Germany in 1858, determined to make the most of this opportunity, the young Harvard graduate had a more or less settled idea on the relationship of America to Europe. The conclusion of the 1812 war can be seen as marking the end of a lingering American colonial complex: in the mid-nineteenth century whatever one might see and learn in the Old World as an important, necessary part of one's education could never obscure the national mood of moral superiority that posited the greater worth of the New World². Adams's early letters give us his travel impressions with a strong political cast: nearly two years (1858-60) in Europe did not change his outlook, "the Boston standard of thought and mental scale of Harvard" approved by experience; his faith in *a priori* moral and political principles was not shaken, while some standard American prejudices toward Europe persisted³.

Though at times freely admitting his fascination with certain aspects of the Old World, such as when describing the spell-binding first glimpse of the Middle Ages in a letter from Nürnberg, Adams's response to Europe, a world "thick with the sense of history and the very taste of time", as H. James said memorably of Italy⁴, seems on the whole conventional and deliberately underplayed: he is obviously trying to strike a pose of detachment, determined not to appear too easily impressed. Adams is always, from the start, the slightly supercilious observer, the intellectual who in his letters from Italy and especially in one from Palermo (1860) concentrates on local colour and human interest — at one remove, though: Garibaldi

and the enthusiastic (if unwashed) multitude cheering the picturesque, world-famous hero are presented in a manner calculated to play down the historic event by reporting it in a half-patronizing, half-humorous tone.

The "temptations of the Old World", so often luridly depicted in America by the representatives of what Tocqueville aptly defined "le patriotisme irrité", far from undermining the young traveller's "Americanism", had in fact (at least as he wrote in 1860) reinforced it: "I have never felt so proud as now of the great qualities of our people, or so confident of the capacity of men to develop their faculties in the mass [...] Europe has a long way to go yet to catch us up"⁵.

The seven years (1861-8) Adams spent in London, "that dreadful, delightful city", were of crucial importance for his education, in spite of the repeated disclaimers to the contrary in the *Education*. Adams responded to the symbolic attraction of the careers pursued by the heroes of Disraeli and Bulwer-Lytton and aspired to be a Coningsby or a Pelham: nothing could be more propitious, to this end, than gaining access to "the perfection of human society". This did not prove so easy as he had anticipated: the scion of New England aristocracy was, for quite a while, made to feel an outsider, in a climate of veiled (or open) hostility to the cause of the Union and of humiliating indifference, or worse of unwelcome, agonizing notoriety, as when he was discovered to be the anonymous contributor of correspondences from England to some American newspapers, and maliciously "roasted" in *The Times* (Jan. 1862). The episode caused Adams acute embarrassment and made him, from then on, morbidly afraid of criticism and increasingly concerned with devising complex strategies to control the response of the public, or to avoid it altogether by publishing anonymously or privately.

In 1863, however, Adams felt better disposed towards English society and Europe in general, feeling a sense of kinship, of being integrated into a complex whole that validated, instead of

¹ See e.g. F. MacShane, *The American in Europe*, New York, Dutton, 1965, p. 83.

² R. B. Nye & J. E. Morpurgo, *A History of the United States*, 2 vols., Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972, vol. II, pp. 339-45 and G. Micks, *Passionate Pilgrims: The American Paradox of Seeking a Cultural Identity in Europe, 1802-60*, with an introduction by Guido Fink, Pescara, Tracce, 1992, pp. 17-18.

³ Cf. E. Samuels, *The Young Henry Adams*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1948, pp. 74-127.

⁴ Henry James, *Italian Hours*, New York, Grove Press, n.d., p. 362.

⁵ Cf. Nye & Morpurgo, II, p. 340; letter to his brother Francis.

negating, his identity as a man from the New World: "Young England, young Europe of which I am by tastes and education a part"⁶. It should be noted that the use of "young" in this context almost amounts to an oxymoron. In an optimistic, expansive mood that would be later unthinkable, Adams seems here to be implying that the process of rebirth and renewal which connoted America might finally be at work in old, decaying Europe, fired by the luminous example across the Atlantic.

Before he went back to America in 1860, Adams had written to his brother that he felt sure their father "would lay the fault of every failure and every error in my life to Europe", since the elder Adams like Jefferson, Hawthorne and many others before and after him, had fears that Europe might unfit Americans for America. There would be other reasons, however, to make Adams progressively ill at ease in America, and he never seemed to regret the years he spent in Europe as a young man. In retrospect, those years seemed to him the most significant in his life: his stay in England had been "a golden time [...] the biggest piece of luck I ever had"⁷. Adams's exposure to British hostility during the Civil War had, however, important consequences at the time: he realized that the Old World (and signally the Old Home) was no benevolent neutral in regards to American affairs, and this realisation coloured his later view of the dichotomy Old World/New World.

According to Henry James, the Civil war marked a divide in the nation and in his own life, between a world he associated with youth and innocence, when he too, like Hawthorne, was "an American of an earlier, simpler type", and a European world of experience, knowledge and wordliness⁸. The post-war American, for James, having eaten of "the tree of knowledge", will henceforth be an observer: the young Adams, though later adopting the same attitude of detachment, felt his allegiance to

⁶ Qtd in Samuels, p.127.

⁷ Letter to Gaskell, 16 Apr.1911.

⁸ Cf. R. Poirier, *A World Elsewhere*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 94-95.

his country's democratic republican experiment strengthened, and seemed also fully convinced that "one of the responsibilities of being an American is fighting against a superstitious valuation of Europe". When Adams went back to Washington in 1868, he too believed, like most of his countrymen, that the United States were an achieved democracy possessed of something that England, France and the rest of the world did not have, and in general kept up the familiar dichotomy between the two contrasted worlds, whereby the Old World was seen as corrupt, regressive, plagued by wars and ancient hatreds that "had made a slaughter-house of Europe"¹⁰, while the New was democratic, progressive and incontaminant. Yet Adams's first-hand contact with English culture in the widest sense (literature, science, philosophy) and the lifelong association with Gaskell, met in London in those years, reinforced his interest for an intellectual and methodological approach to the problem of historiography and literary form that was based on principles somewhat different from those available in America. Thus in the *History*, "challenging the old British taunt that America had never produced a great historian, Adams worked on British principles, against the American main current"¹¹.

On the whole, after Adams had returned to the United States his attitude was one that blended nationalism with cosmopolitanism: this was not an unusual combination, but with him it acquired special connotations, since more than a blend it was the instable coalescing of contraries, one of the great antinomies on which his thought seems to have structured itself as a perpetual dialectic between polarities. Old World and New World, culture and nature, time and space, past and

⁹ Qtd in M. Pachter, "American Cosmopolitanism, 1870-1910", in M. Chénetier and R. Kroes, (eds.), *Impressions of a Gilded Age*, Amsterdam, Universiteit von Amsterdam, 1983, p.30.

¹⁰ Cf. H. Adams, *History of the United States*, 9 vols, New York, Scribner's 1891, I, VI, p. 113 (*Storia degli Stati Uniti*, trad. G. Vetrano, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1969); Nye & Morpurgo, II, p. 350, p. 339.

¹¹ W. Dusinberre, "H. Adams in England", *Journal of American Studies*, 11 (August 1977), p. 186.

present, unity and multiplicity are sets of opposites that, as happens with James, recur constantly in Adams's mind and work, generating in their turn endless variants. Adams and James invite obvious comparison¹²: exact contemporaries on the American literary scene, lifelong friends, both had bitten deeply into the apple of European culture (the striking image is James's), which had become an essential ingredient in their own cultural identity, and both were distressed (though the term seems too mild for Adams's reactions) by American ills.

Traditionally implying various series of opposites such as light/darkness, past/present, innocence/experience, simplicity/complexity, the basic relation Europe/America structured itself for James into opposed systems of cultural and social conventions, as contrasting codes of behaviour, a "conflict of manners", as he defined it. The "interest and tension of disparity" was central to his vision, and "the great novelist of contrast and comparison"¹³ was firmly convinced that "no possibility of contrast in the human lot was so great as that encountered as we turn back and forth between the distinctively American and the distinctively European outlook"¹⁴. Thus American innocence, candour and intelligence are set against European falsity, corruption, and cunning: yet already in his early stories James undermines the common American presumption that the New World was unambiguously the land of hope, freedom and progress¹⁵. The dialectic developing from the familiar polarity is never allowed to harden into a rigid dichotomy, and the superiority of one side of the Atlantic over the other is never affirmed.

The international theme and its "tension of disparity" had the same interest and importance for Adams as for James, for much the same reasons: both probed and analysed the

complexities and ambiguities of the transatlantic consciousness of Americans to clarify certain issues — moral, psychological, historical — that deeply concerned them and that they firmly believed should concern Americans. Both, finally, found in the opportunities for the display of oppositions and tensions afforded by the international theme a sort of objective correlative for their sense of inner division and of lacerating contending forces within the body politic and the self.

Both James and Adams have been seen as expatriates, suffering the common fate of all such *déracinés*: wandering, as Parrington said, "between worlds", they found a home nowhere. Yet James's love for Europe, his long sojourn there and his cosmopolitan outlook made him no less American, and he wrote for the United States, not for Europe¹⁶. The same may be said of Adams, though his attitude was more and more difficult to decipher as time went by and he attacked both the Old and the New Worlds with equal energy and contempt. In the late 1890's, he felt that he had had more than enough of Europe, while his appetite for America "was not voracious either". This strikes a note endlessly repeated through his late correspondence, which conjures a singularly gloomy, nightmarish vision of stupidity, malice, greed and decay on both sides of the Atlantic. The sickness of modern civilization was one: if in America "we were diseased, so is all the world", while a little later (1896) he announced: "Bad as the stench of Paris is, it is a healthy and invigorating putridity compared with the deadened gangrene of London and New York"¹⁷.

Though easily unsurpassed in his Swiftian talent for sarcastic vituperation, Adams has been rightly seen as prefiguring that feeling of discontent and revulsion from the new commercially-oriented United States shared by many artists and intellectuals of the 1920's, who felt like him that America was no longer the dream country of the future, but a country of spoiled promise.

¹² Cf. J. C. Rowe, *H. Adams and H. James*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1976, p. 9.

¹³ Poirier, p.100

¹⁴ Preface to the New York edition, qtd in C. Strout, "Henry James and the International Theme Today", *SA* 13 (1967), p. 290.

¹⁵ Cf. Strout, p.284.

¹⁶ Cf. E. Scheyer, *The Circle of H. Adams: Art and Artist*, Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1970, p. 26.

¹⁷ Qtd in A. Monchoux, "Propos inédits sur la France dans les lettres de Henry Adams", *Revue de Littérature Comparée* 41, 1 (Jan-Mars 1967), p. 265.

Yet Adams, like James, was "a man of the rarest temper, who loved his country in his fashion"¹⁸. At the very time he was composing his trenchant satire exposing wholesale political corruption, he wrote to his English friend Gaskell that America was "the only country now worth working for, or pleasant to work in", adding this ringing declaration of faith in America and its glorious future:

As I belong to that class of people who have great faith in this country and who believe that in another century it will be saying in its turn the last word of civilization, I enjoy the expectation of the coming day, and try to imagine that I am myself, [...] the first rays of that great light which is to dazzle and set the world on fire hereafter¹⁹.

An inveterate wanderer, Adams travelled around the globe, though on the whole spending most of his time abroad in Europe ("My beloved rotten old senile wreck of Europe" in 1900): from the 1890's on he divided his time between Washington and his Paris "attic", visiting many other European points. Yet Adams never lost sight of his native land, carefully following American affairs in the newspapers and discussing them in detail with his correspondents. America was not Boston or any other place, though he travelled widely across the United States, it was Washington: "All of the earth's emisphere are compassed in his later correspondence, yet the Washington address recurs at the head of his letters, marking an always ultimate point of return"²⁰.

"Home was Washington"²¹: though this refers to 1892, Adams

¹⁸ M. Cunliffe, *The Literature of the United States*, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1970⁵, p. 241.

¹⁹ Letter (1877) to Gaskell, qtd in Samuels, p. 288.

²⁰ W. M. Decker, *The Literary Vocation of Henry Adams*, Chapel Hill & London, University of North Carolina Press, 1990, p. 1

²¹ H. Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. D. Brogan, Houghton Mifflin, 1961, p.317 (*L'educazione di Henry Adams*, a cura di V. Gabrieli, Milano, Adelphi, 1964. For an early Italian appreciation of Adams, see also C. Gorlier, *L'universo domestico*, Roma, Edizioni Storia e Letteratura, 1962, pp. 233-64).

always saw the city as the "only place in America whose society amused me. [...] I gravitate to a capital by a primary law of nature", as he wrote in 1877, and the *Education* is full of references to Washington that make clear its value to Adams, from his early stay there with his parents to the "Washington experiment" (1868-70) as a political freelancer for the *Nation* and *The North American Review* onwards. What Washington meant to Adams comes out strikingly in a letter to Elizabeth Cameron (20 Jan. 1902) where he describes himself at home in the capital, "*in the very heart of the world*, with my fingers close to the valves [of the engine of power]"²².

Adams's Washington has the concrete reality of a closely observed, familiar and home-like physical place, and the suggestiveness, coloured by Adams's ambivalence, of a metaphor for power, that political power that had constantly eluded and fascinated him to the end. Thirdly, he viewed and used the capital as a national icon charged with potent symbolism. Tocqueville, whom Adams admired, had posited a symbolical relationship between the sociopolitical system of the American democracy and the design of the American capital that was to embody the utopian grandeur of its vision²³: after the Civil War, Washington with the completed, expanded Capitol became the central symbol of the national myth whose future-oriented, visionary quality powerfully affected the American imagination. By the 1870's, it was firmly established as a national icon — the Millennium made marble, with its "magnificent white-marbled Capitol" that could rival any European palace (as Bryant proclaimed in 1874); the only fulcrum of the lines of force and the fresh energies of the New World, the seat of power, the visible embodiment of the success of the American democratic experiment. Adams often used Washington as a controlling symbol and never lost sight of its multiple significance: the main opposition in his dialectic system

²² Cf. Adams, *Democracy*, ed. E. Samuels, Gloucester, Mass., P. Smith, 1965, p.9. Italics mine. (*Democrazia*, a cura di M. V. D'Amico, Pisa, Nistri Lischi, 1984)

²³ Cf. L. Hönnighausen, "Washington, DC and the National Myth" *RSA* 8, (1990) p. 226.

of contraries, on which all the other sets of opposites were predicated, rather than America/Europe, might be termed Washington, DC/Europe, particularly if we keep in mind that Adams's perspective is at all times chiefly political.

Upon his return to Washington in 1868, Adams was still confident he could play an active part in shaping the political life of his country: as it became clear that the United States no longer had any use for the services of the Adams family, his ambitions shifted from politics to history, and after his academic interlude at Harvard he reappeared in Washington in the late 1870's adopting the pose of a non-partisan scholar, in his new role as a historian for whom politics was his subject, not his career. Adams had already previously used journalism, teaching and editing as forms of pressure, and now turned to imaginative expression, history or fiction: he decided that "authorship, alternatively castigating and celebrating, could serve as a form of statecraft, at a remove from the political arena that had disappointed four generations of Adamses"²⁴. Though applicable to Adams's entire output, this seems especially true of his monumental *History of the United States* (1889-91): initially conceived as a high contribution to a future national order, it was clearly aimed at making an impact on the political and popular life of contemporary America, stimulating it to greater self-awareness and sense of purpose.

Adams's ambivalence is nowhere more evident than in his rapidly composing *Democracy* (written in early 1878, published anonymously in 1880) precisely while doing his research and the preliminary work for the *History*, his veiled bid for public recognition and influence, to be discreetly exercised from "an exceptionally good position on the sidelines"²⁵. As the setting of his merciless satirical novel, post-Civil war Washington at a crucial political moment (the interregnum between two

administrations) confirms once again the centrality and symbolic significance of the capital for Adams, who found the city a perfect emblem for the discrepancy between democratic pretense and reality. Yet the mythicized image of the capital was powerful enough to survive the corruption of the Grant administration and the "crisis of Democratic self-confidence"²⁶ that Adams satirized and reflected: in the *History*, Washington is forcefully presented, in the very first chapter, as the symbol of an America determined to master a continent and create on its soil "a single republican nation"²⁷.

The novel is a brilliant satirical fable modelled on Disraeli's political fiction. As in T. L. Peacock's witty, polished "novels of talk", here too non-verbal action is secondary and dialogue everything, while the essential device used, getting together a heterogeneous group of characters — mostly drawn from real life, and so thinly disguised it was impossible not to identify them and setting them all off one against the other in conversation, — is the same: Adams's eclectic cast, drawn from the world of politics and diplomacy, allows him to orchestrate a range of conflicting views into flexible, often brilliant dialogue. Though *Democracy* is ostensibly focused on the American political arena, the international theme is central to Adams's strategy; it is stated at the outset when introducing Mrs Lee, a sort of politicized, luckier Isabel Archer, and the discussions on the comparative merits and virtues of America and Europe that arise in the company are important to prepare for the ironical twist given to the familiar polarity America / innocence / purity vs. Europe / experience / corruption.

Like Adams himself, Mrs Lee "neither knew nor greatly cared whether America or Europe were best to live in; she had no violent love for either, and she had no objection to abusing both"²⁸. Yet when faced with a choice of life, she chooses America, returning to her native land "American to the tips of

²⁴ R. P. Blackmur, "The Expense of Greatness: the Emphasis on Henry Adams" in *Critical Essays on Henry Adams*, ed. E.N. Harbert, New York, Macmillan, 1985, p.39.

²⁵ *Education*, VI.

²⁶ Hönnighausen, p. 234.

²⁷ *History*, I, i, p.21; J.C. Levenson, *The Mind and Art of Henry Adams*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1957, pp. 112, 118.

²⁸ *Democracy*, p. 5.

the fingers". Adams's version of the international theme is presented here in a perspective that heightens its political and moral implications while playing down or ignoring the usual contrast based on cultural and artistic abundance and deprivation: the rich past and art treasures of Europe seem to have left no impression whatsoever on Mrs Lee, who feels that with her fashionable plunder, her Corot and "some bales of Persian rugs and Japanese porcelain" she has exhausted what the Old World could offer her, and is now ready to enter the "engine room" and "touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society"²⁹. Again a familiar antithesis is implied here between the stagnation of Europe and the dynamic power of America, where things happen and happen fast: yet, as she will painfully find out, a sort of spiritual impotence has spread over the two contrasted worlds, blurring differences, casting an ambiguous light on both. Like Isabel and other Jamesian heroines, Mrs Lee will learn that "good and evil are not respectively aligned on the western and eastern side of the Atlantic"³⁰.

Mrs Lee, like her creator, has a passion for power and philosophizing, patriotism and moral integrity: she, too, decides on a "Washington experiment", drawn by the spectacle of powerful forces at work, and spends the winter in the capital to get "to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government". Apparently seeking "what amusement there might be in politics", in fact "what she wanted was POWER"³¹. She finds its embodiment in Senator Radcliffe, the public man of common origins whose fresh, Western energies promise renewal and progress: he is presented as the *homo novus Americanus*, the champion of those values and pristine virtues the New World had from the start proudly contrasted with the self-seeking ambition of the Old World. Ironically, in the end the America he represents is found to be just as corrupt and

degraded as any other country in past-ridden, perfidious Europe.

Though she falls under his spell, Mrs Lee finally manages to see through him and save herself, if psychologically bruised, by fleeing Washington and America, and taking refuge in Egypt, thus opting out of both juxtaposed worlds: "Democracy has taken my nerves to pieces. Oh, what a great rest it would be to live in the great Pyramid and look out forever on the polar star!"³². This outburst has the function of bringing out one of the many ironies in the book, as in Dr Johnson's *Rasselas* (whose questing protagonist is one of Adams's many *personae* in the *Education*) the great Pyramid, a symbol of man's immoderate desires and almost unlimited capacity for self-deception, is indicated as a warning against the "hunger of imagination" and the appetite for novelty and power. We are thus obliquely reminded that Adams's heroine, again like Isabel Archer, is self-deceived, as well as victimized by a designing villain. Radcliffe, finally, represents not only the degradation of past ideals, but also the negative force that is dragging America down, to the same level of immoral, unprincipled Europe³³.

Baron Jacobi, a "witty, cynical, broken-down Parisian *roué*", has rightly been seen as apparently "the quintessence of villains so prominent in James's Europe-symbolism"³⁴: yet, in the main ironic reversal in the novel, it is precisely this wordly old cynic who feels outraged by Radcliffe's smugness and assumption of a double standard of morality while arrogantly proclaiming the superiority of American ideals and values. Jacobi exposes with sarcastic eloquence the dishonesty and humbug he sees rampant in the New World:

You Americans believe yourselves to be excepted from the operation of general laws. [...] I am corrupt myself, only I do have courage to proclaim it, and you others have it not. Rome, Paris Vienna, Petersburg, London, all are corrupt; only Washington is pure! Well, I declare to

²⁹ Ibid., p. 9.

³⁰ H. Levin, *The Power of Blackness*, New York, Vintage Books, 1958, p. 243.

³¹ *Democracy*, p. 9.

³² Ibid. p. 153.

³³ Cf. Levenson, pp. 91-92; Decker, p. 155.

³⁴ Levenson, p. 91.

you that in all my experience I have found no society which has had elements of corruption like the United States³⁵.

Nobody takes up the challenge and refutes him, and his final prophecy is allowed to stand unanswered: in a hundred years, the United States will be "more corrupt than Rome under Caligula; more corrupt than the Church under Leo X; more corrupt than France under the Regent!". This passage looks back (or rather forward) to the young Adams's musings upon his first visit to Rome, as reported in the *Education*: "Rome was actual; it was England; it was going to be America"³⁶. If examined in connection with Jacobi's speech, rather than within the stylized, highly structured symbolical context of the *Education*, the passage seems to indicate a collapsing together of the contrast past / present, Old World / New World as first Rome, then England and last America, the whole Western civilization declines and inevitably falls by a sort of contagion if not evolution, while the New Continent will come to resemble more and more closely its corrupted counterparts, past and present. Rome, Paris, Vienna, Petersburg, London, Washington: "all are corrupt".

The pessimistic note of disillusionment with American democracy, the realization that American exceptionalism was no longer operative are conveyed by Adams through an adroit, personal use of the international theme that seemingly makes a mockery of its central article of faith, the conviction that whatever advantages America might lack in comparison with Europe, its moral superiority was not to be discussed. In the era of "Grantism", it is no longer possible to distinguish Washington from any other capital, the old antithesis America / Europe is no longer valid in ethical terms as both countries are on the same, low moral plane. If Adams in *Democracy* paid off with zest

³⁵ *Democracy*, p. 50.

³⁶ *Education*, p. 91. For Adams and Rome, see A. Mariani, "Roma nella letteratura americana del 900", *Studi Romani*, vol. XXXV, nn.1-2 (gennaio-giugno 1987), pp. 184-5.

the rest of his outstanding political scores, hugely enjoying both the fracas and the endless speculations about its authorship³⁷, he was also concerned to ask a question of the greatest importance to himself and to earnest Americans: the nature of American political life being what it is, can a person of moral sensibility take part in it? The answer is, predictably, no, and it applies equally to his patriotic heroine and to himself³⁸. Adams could thus proudly proclaim "Non serviam" on impeccable ethical grounds: he was well aware, however, that though he had long embarrassingly made himself available for office, nobody ever asked him to serve.

Though no single voice in the novel is assigned unimpeachable authority by the strategically anonymous, absent author³⁹, and though noteven Mrs Lee, in manyways a projection of Adams, may be taken to speak for him, yet aspects of the author appear in some of the characters, such as Carrington, French, Gore and Jacobi himself, whose dramatic yet shrewd indictment of contemporary America has a true Adamsian ring. To castigate the Radcliffes and other *parvenus* who had pushed "the best people" out of office and were fast ruining the country through the *persona* of an "old Parisian *roué*" with a wicked leer must have appealed to Adams's sense of humour.

The novel was seen, both in America and in England, as a statement of unrelieved pessimism which struck "a blow against democracy", drawing blood right and left: it is perhaps understandable, then, why "only few readers" perceived the affirmative faith concealed, according to Samuels, under the satire. The critic adds that Adams voiced through Nathan Gore, writer and disappointed politician, his own deepest convictions, "the irreducible dogmas of his proud inheritance"⁴⁰. While this, if taken literally would reduce *Democracy* to a witty, spiteful lampoon on the Adamses' corrupt political enemies, it is certainly

³⁷ Cf. D'Amico, p. 35.

³⁸ Cf. Trilling, "Adams at Ease", in *A Gathering of Fugitives*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1956, pp. 123-4.

³⁹ Cf. Decker, p.149.

⁴⁰ Samuels, "Henry Adams", in Harbert ed., p.79; qtd in Decker, p.151.

correct to see Gore's declaration of faith in democracy, with its muted fervour, as seriously meant: it would be difficult, otherwise, to make sense of the first chapters of the *History*, and especially of "American Ideals", written at about this time. Yet Gore is deliberately portrayed as an ambiguous spokesman, carrying no authority, as Adams avoids committing himself to any one definite position, or identifying fully with any of his characters. Adams is always "multiple, other", in him (as he said of Gladstone) there were "two or three or a dozen men; [...] never less than three", hence the kaleidoscopic effect of his work on the reader: "No sooner has one configuration been established than another rushes to take its place"⁴¹.

Adams owed to his puritan heritage that instinctive apprehension of history as the unfolding of a moral and teleological drama which easily combined with the belief in the American mission. Americans saw themselves stronger and more virtuous than Europeans, and this central article of the national faith is also the central thesis of the *History of the United States*: "The American stood in the world a new order of man. [...] Compared with this lithe young figure, Europe was actually in decrepitude"⁴². If America could not ignore Europe, as James had said, Adams planned his *History* in order to demonstrate that Europe could no longer afford to ignore America: the task he set himself was to handle the emergence of the American nation from an angle that would show how it was central to modern European history⁴³.

The *History* is conceived as a representation of the contrasting histories of America and Europe: the international theme is crucial also to the execution of the work, as Adams used its set of opposites to give dramatic relief to his national theme, in itself drab and monotonous, lacking in variety, movement and colour, as he wrote to Lodge in 1881. From the basic antinomy

America / Europe Adams develops a long binary series of oppositions that functions as a structuring, stylistic device. The opposition Old World / New World is seen in terms of closed space / open space, oppression / freedom, static, class-bound social conditions / opportunities for all, cult of the past / cult of the present and of a future full of possibilities, war / peace, to name only a few: the Jamesian contrast innocence / experience is also quite prominent, projected on the large canvas of international politics. Adams's Jefferson and Madison, like James's characters, behave with noble innocence when dealing with Napoleon, cast as a Gothic villain subsuming in himself the long, dark European tradition of evil and treachery. Yet Adams's Americans manage to win a signal victory that establishes two important points: the unity of their nation and its divergence from older ones. Already in 1817 the difference between Europe and America was decided, and their roles reversed:

That Europe, within certain limits, might tend towards American ideas was possible, but that America should under any circumstances follow the experiences of European development might therefore be reckoned as improbable. American character was formed, if not fixed⁴⁴.

The contrast Europe / America is always used by Adams to stress the superiority of the American democratic experiment in terms of strict objectivity, yet skilfully orchestrated to elicit an emotional response. The patronizing attitude of Europeans is repeatedly exposed, and every issue, as later in the *Education*, even when Adams juxtaposes American and European men of letters⁴⁵, is seen in terms of power and national prestige.

⁴¹ Qtd. in Samuels, "Henry Adams", p.101; J. Pilling, *Autobiography and Imagination*, London, Routledge, 1982, p. 20.

⁴² Cf. G. Hockfield, *Henry Adams*, New York, Barnes & Noble, 1962, p.2; *History*, I, vi, pp.114-5.

⁴³ Cf. Levenson, p.119.

⁴⁴ *History*, IX, x, 221. It seems strange that D. Perkins (Prefatory Note to Henry Adams, *The United States in 1800*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1966, p. vi) should find that in the *History* the contrast between the Old World and the New is "only suggested", while it is obviously Adams's main structuring device.

⁴⁵ Cf.e.g. *Education* p. 319.

Adams recognizes that the history of the United States is "unromantic" and lacks many elements that characterize European history giving it complexity and variety: while James's much longer, famous list of the "items of high civilization" absent from "the texture of American life" is allowed to stand only indirectly qualified by the final remarks, Adams immediately makes it clear that the true strength of America is to be found precisely in those "lacks", while with all their advantages few European historians "succeeded in enlivening or dignifying the lack of motive, intelligence, and morality, the futility of human efforts to escape from difficulties religious, political, and social" of their material⁴⁶. The contrast between the Old World and the New is thus extended to opposed approaches to history, past and present. As a professional American historian, Adams is here clearly challenging the so far uncontested superiority of European historiography by claiming that the principles and methods of Comte, Spencer and other positivist thinkers could be validated and effective only if applied to a proper object of study, such as the history of the United States: "Should history ever become a true science, it must expect to establish its laws, not from the complicated story of rival European nations, but from the methodical evolution of a great democracy"⁴⁷.

Though the *History* was conceived and executed in competition with those very nineteenth-century historians whose scientific methods he was adapting and testing on his national American heritage, Adams's real exemplar was an earlier British historian. It had always been his conscious, if only indirectly indicated, ambition to be the American Gibbon, and if in the *Education* he contrasts the great historian, inspired by the ruins of the Forum to write his masterpiece, with "Henry Adams", his fictional double who can only learn from the same view a lesson of failure, in real life Adams worked hard to emulate, if not surpass, Gibbon's great work. The analogies are

⁴⁶ *History*, IX, x, p. 223.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 222.

quite deliberate, but Adams's subject was "a rise, not a fall"⁴⁸: he set himself to vindicate America over Europe, finally establishing its superiority. The organizing pattern, the contrast unity / multiplicity that underlies every other set of opposites, reinforces the strong positive image Adams has been carefully constructing and projecting throughout the nine volumes, but especially in the programmatic, ideologically charged "American Ideals" (I, vi) and the Epilogue (IX, x).

In 1890, while the last volumes of the *History* were being published, he wrote to Elizabeth Cameron:

The History belongs to the me of 1870; a strangely different being from the me of 1890. There are not nine pages in the nine volumes that now express anything of my interests or my feelings; unless perhaps some of my disillusionments⁴⁹.

For once, Adams was not posturing, as at least the disillusionments were real enough: since childhood he had shared the family conviction that the Adamses were born to hold power as a matter of course ("To him, that there should be a doubt of his being President was a new idea"⁵⁰), while "a continual tendency towards politics", family pride and an ardent ambition (not unmixed with a certain vanity) were permanent traits, already identified by Adams himself as early as 1858. He had confidently expected political power, prestige, influence in the world of public affairs to be "handed to him on a silver platter", as O.W. Holmes Jr crisply put it⁵¹. In the new, aggressively capitalist America of the Gilded Age, however, nothing was stable, not even the natural precedence of the

⁴⁸ Cf. *Education*, pp. 89-93; F.O. Matthiessen, "The real Education" (1948), in *The Responsibilities of the Critic*, ed. J. Radcliffe, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 226.

⁴⁹ Quoted in J.F. Byrnes, *The Virgin of Chartres*, London & Toronto, Ass. University Press, 1970, p. 53.

⁵⁰ *Education*, p. 16.

⁵¹ Quoted in T. J. Jackson Lears, "In Defence of Henry Adams", *The Wilson Quarterly* (Autumn 1983), p. 82.

Adams family, and he found himself the first Adams ever not to hold any office, barred from the national eminence that had always seemed a birthright.

As a defence strategy, Adams had assumed the pose of a conscientious objector towards a corrupt and inefficient political class that ignored him, and had turned to history: his great work was however to be seen as a guide to political action, exerting a significant influence on the nation. But the *History*, now acclaimed as a landmark, "one of the greatest achievements of American historiography"⁵², at the time failed to win the wide public recognition Adam had anticipated: authorship as statecraft had proved ineffective. This failure affected Adams in several ways: most of all, it reinforced his sense of not being able to control politics and history whether by wielding power or the pen, confirming him in his disaffection for American society, while *fin-de-siècle* Europe was also mercilessly castigated. He seemed to wish, like Dorian Gray, that the *fin-de-siècle* were *fin du globe*, since to both life was "a great disappointment".

For all his carefully cultivated pose as neglected patrician, *sangfroid* doomsayer, literary man whose virtue and bereavement had fatally deflected him from the pursuit of an active public life, observer of politics *sub specie historiae*, Adams the detached, ironical spectator, the "humble student" for whom "the game — not the stakes — was the chief interest"⁵³, was full of resentments. Increasingly estranged from his own time, trapped in a hostile, alien world, in the 1890's Adams travelled restlessly in space: he also travelled in time, seeking a release from the pressures and conflicts of the present. Whenever he travelled, Adams projected his lines back into the past and forward into the future, and after 1890 he always tried to overlook and exclude the distressing, disappointing present. His most significant travel on his intellectual and emotional time machine took him back to the Middle Ages, when his Norman ancestors were at the height of their power, that twelfth century that was, as he said, his "only resource".

⁵² Matthiessen, p. 227.

⁵³ *Education*, p. 440.

Like Carlyle and Ruskin (whose central ideas he adopted), he found he could handle modernity, politics and his frustrations by "losing" himself in the past: nostalgia and the need for compensation were not, however, his only motivations, since if the Middle Ages afforded a way out of his century, they also functioned as a sort of screen on which he could project what worried him or excited his contempt in the present⁵⁴. A sharp critical awareness of all the negative aspects of the contemporary world underlies the idealized vision of the Middle Ages in *Mont St Michel and Chartres* (1904), without ever surfacing except by implication: the book stresses throughout medieval unity, both social and intellectual, due to the cohesive force of a widely shared belief in an ideal. The opposition unity / multiplicity is more than ever crucial to the conception and organization of Adams's intellectual and artistic project, which extends beyond *Chartres* to the *Education*, its companion book or "sequel" (as it is called in the 1918 "Editor's Preface"): both were linked in his mind, and should be read as such in order to grasp their full significance⁵⁵.

Chartres ("a historical romance of the year 1200" as Adams said in 1902) starts out in the mode of a travel-guide book: by this device a tour in space is transformed into a tour in time, and the focus shifts from tourist geography to poetic history. Like Ruskin, Adams imaginatively recreated the past interpreting the society of the Middle Ages through its art in order to reveal its intellectual and emotional dimension: realizing that the only way to grasp medieval unity available to modern man was through the vision of an artist, the historian's way being inadequate and the religious one lost to modern man, he intended to convey the spirit of a world as organically coherent as a work of art⁵⁶. The book, yet another version of the international theme, may be seen as Adams's form of "expatriation"⁵⁷ across the ocean of time. The medieval past, of

⁵⁴ Cf. J. F. Byrnes, *The Virgin of Chartres*, London & Toronto, Ass. Univ. Press., 1970, pp. 119, 130.

⁵⁵ Cf. C. R. Anderson, "Henry Adams 1838-1918", in Harbert ed., p. 132.

⁵⁶ Cf. Anderson, p.133; Hochfield, p. 101.

⁵⁷ Cf. Cunliffe, p. 243.

necessity European, is presented free from all its dark, negative connotations so vivid in the American imagination, bathed in the pure, shining Ruskinian light of an age of faith and unity, while the present — America and Europe — is a field of contending forces, tragically divided and dominated by deception, doubt and ambiguity.

Quest for form has been rightly singled out as the keynote of Adams's whole career as a writer. Though he pretended to view it "chiefly as a literary experiment", the *Education* was Adams's last major effort to re-establish his voice as a persuasive, influential presence on the American public scene, a minority statement, for all its self-deprecation, against the new America of the financier and the jobber⁵⁸. One way or another, Adams made himself the subject of all he wrote, exploiting his remarkable talent for self-dramatization in a variety of ways; if Oscar Wilde had announced in *De Profundis* "I was a man who stood in symbolic relations to the art and culture of my age", Adams made even larger claims for himself, as he placed his fictional double, "Henry Adams", in symbolic relations with history, time, and the whole "multiverse". The international theme is prominent, indeed as essential here as in the other works examined, since in this rich, complex and provocative book Adams contributed to create the view of the world seen from North America as a whole, ancient and modern, East and West, that is "the basis for the best in modern American thought"⁵⁹.

Adams's version of the international theme in the *Education* is one of the main factors for its centrality in the American cultural memory. Adams plays with the familiar sets of opposites investing them with multiple reverberations, as they take their appointed place in a complex overall design. The symbolic treatment has the effect of underscoring division or contradiction in human experience: through "Henry Adams", he sets up for

⁵⁸ Cf. Decker, pp. 3, 42, 46. For the American artist's reaction against his society, see A. Lombardo's illuminating "The American Dream of the American artist", in Chenetier and Kroes, pp. 96-113, especially p. 106.

⁵⁹ Scheyer, p. 11.

study a series of oppositions such as feeling / intellect, unity / multiplicity, past / present, organic / inorganic, natural / mechanical. No synthesis, no reconciliation seems finally possible: Adams, who had learned from Hegel the use of contradictory or polar images, never quite accepted his positive belief or his system as a whole⁶⁰, and devised a literary strategy of balance and division that reflects his epistemological position with accuracy and point: the principle of non-contradiction was suspended, "since the human mind has already learned to deal in contradictions"⁶¹.

Adams belongs to that group of American writers who, in Trilling's words, "were repositories of the dialectic of their times — they contained both the yes and the no of their culture, and by that token they were prophetic of the future"⁶². As he said of his friend La Farge, Adams even contradicted his own contradictions, balanced between hopefulness and despair, affirmation and denial, belief and skepticism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism. He repeatedly warned his correspondents that contradiction was unavoidable as it was a law of life⁶³: it was also the structuring principle of his thought and work.

After examining Henry Adams's treatment of the international theme in some of his works, we can discern a pattern that can be described by using first a spatial, then a temporal model. At first, the familiar opposition America / Europe may be seen as working itself out in space: two continents, two countries, are juxtaposed and contrasted, with their respective connotations (innocence / corruption, freedom / oppression, and so on). The opposition unity / multiplicity, which underlies Adams's dialectic from first to last, in the *History* is presented as embodied in Republican America, with

⁶⁰ Cf. Scheyer, pp. 43-44. For a perceptive assessment of Adams's last phase, cf. A. Mariani, "L'ultimo periodo di Henry Adams", in *I contemporanei: Novecento Americano*, a cura di E. Zolla, Roma, Lucarini, 1981, pp. 22-23.

⁶¹ *Education*, p. 489.

⁶² L. Trilling, "Reality in America", in *The Liberal Imagination*, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1970^o, p. 23.

⁶³ Cf. Samuels, "Henry Adams", pp. 100-101.

Washington as its unifying symbol, *vs.* Europe, fragmented into petty, quarrelsome states. In the 1890's, when Adams felt increasingly alienated from his own times and his endless travels were no longer just across land and sea, but across history, he shifted to a temporal perspective, and turned away from a debased present, both European and American, to an idealized medieval past: with *Chartres* Adams is no longer exploring tensions between two continents, but between two epochs in time.

Both perspectives, spatial and temporal, are used, finally, in the *Education*: the first chapters (I-XV), with their Jamesian overtones, follow the same model we find in Adams's works to the *History*, while later the opposition America / Europe is subsumed in a theory of history whereby the antithetical forces it embodied, unity and multiplicity, no longer confront each other across the Atlantic, but across the gulf of time. The pattern that emerges shows that Adams, though early a literary man of the world with cosmopolitan experience and tastes, till the 1890's was driven by his innate patriotism to an orthodox affirmation of America's superiority.

In *Democracy* there is a disillusioned flattening out of the familiar differences between the two countries that looks forward to an attitude commonly adopted by Adams later on: in the *History*, however, he reasserts his faith in America, completely reversing the position emerging from Jacobi's speech in the novel: "[...] between the morals of politics and society in America, and those then prevailing in Europe, there was no room for comparison — there was room only for contrast"⁶⁴. Yet, as his vision was darkening, American exceptionalism was negated, since contemporary America had become to him indistinguishable from rotting *fin-de-siècle* Europe: both are rejected, while that supreme quality of unity, of moral, intellectual and emotional cohesion and integrity he had earlier identified with America is no longer to be found in the corrupt United States of the present, but in the European past, in

Norman France.

In the *Education*, finally, the international theme is used in the London chapters as a politicized version of the typical Jamesian fable of innocence and experience: American honesty and integrity (Lincoln, the Adamses) pitted against English duplicity and indifference (Lord Russell, Palmerston), with the consequent affirmation of American moral supremacy. This positive evaluation however does not belong to the present, the actual time of writing, but to the time, now irrevocably past, of the events narrated (late 1860's), and in the temporal dimension now adopted the drama of history is acted out in a waste land where national traits and differences are finally blurred as the whole world is hurrying towards Chaos.

An inveterate *poseur*, a man of many voices and masks, Adams played various roles with great virtuosity and gusto: his role-acting was both a reflection of that fragmentation of the self he recognized in society and himself, and a coping device, when he felt threatened by an increasingly incomprehensible world. In his last years, however, Adams was like an actor who has become captive of his role: even more than Hamlet with whom he had so closely and explicitly identified, it was Timon that may be said to hold him in an iron grip. "Hate all, curse all, show charity to none" (*Timon*, IV, iii, 536): Timon's injunction, his endless, violent, sometimes unreasonable railing, his cosmic pessimism and aggressive misanthropy all seem reflected in Adams's sarcastic, despairing pose, alternating between contemptuous aloofness and voluble, virulent vituperation, from the 1890's onwards.

Under the mask of the railing misanthrope, however, we may detect Adams in yet another role, the frustrated patriot who in spite of disappointments and rejection still deeply cares about the welfare of his country, and W. M. Decker is in my opinion right when he affirms that beneath the reticence and evasiveness of the *Education* "lies the implicit proposition that he was the one man who could save America, if only his voice were heard"⁶⁵. That Adams should still feel compelled to retain

⁶⁴ *History*, I, VI, p. 120. Italics mine.

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as his main, if covert, object the political and spiritual redemption of the American people, while simultaneously proclaiming the inutility and impossibility of such an attempt, is one of his many paradoxes, but also the most fruitful of his contradictions.

The basic opposition in the international dialectic, America / Europe, had from the first been felt by Americans as a means to define their country, which after all represented a fundamental protest against the Old World: in dealing with the international theme Adams, like James, was carrying on from a cosmopolitan vantage point that exploration of personal and national identity that was to engage him to the end, focusing on some central issues of public and personal relevance, and formulating, directly or by implication, some pressing questions. These he increasingly found difficult, indeed impossible, to answer: as he said in the Epilogue, "For the treatment of these questions, history required another century of experience"⁶⁶, yet he felt they were of vital import, to him and to America, and he kept asking them. Adams's modernity and relevance to us lie precisely in the dialectic of those unescapable questions.

* A shorter version of this paper was read at the XVIIth AIA conference, Bologna 16-18 February 1995.

⁶⁶ *History*, IX, X, p. 242.